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ABSTRACT

Originally presented in newspaper format, this report consists of 13 articles on American Indian education in Montana, written by journalism students at the University of Montana. The articles include: (1) "The Relentless Killing of a Culture" (David Zelio) which discusses the cultural genocide committed at boarding schools with the aim of assimilating Indian students; (2) "The Evolution of Indian Education" (Berrard L. Azure) which presents sketches of four Indian college students and their motivations and struggles toward higher education; (3) "Urban Indians Try to Hang on to Ancient Way" (Sharon Alton Moses) which discusses a cultural education program focussing on traditional arts and spiritual values for urban Indians in Missoula; (4) "In Box Elder, Cultivating Cultural Awareness" (Kathy McLaughlin) which discusses cultural education taught by elders at a reservation school as part of the effort to prevent alcohol and drug abuse; (5) "Elmer Main: Struggling to Salvage a Language Nearly Lost" (Sharon Alton Moses) which discusses one man's struggle to preserve the Gros Ventre language; (6) "Minerva Allen: Instilling Pride in a People" (Sharon Alton Moses) which discusses bilingual education in reservation schools: (7) "No School in These Parts" (Karen Coates) talks of the controversy over the lack of a high school on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation and the long bus rides and other effects on Indian students; (8) "The Day Jamie Almost Died" (Elizabeth Ichizawa) about alcohol abuse recovery programs for Indian adolescents; (9) "Healing Youngsters Close to Home" about the Blue Bay Healing Center, a camp focussing on community-based drug and alcohol treatment and prevention for adolescents; (10) "Living without Legends Mean the Dying of a People" (Woody Kipp) discusses alcoholism on the Blackfeet Indian Reservation; (11) "At Rocky Boy's: None of the Money Made Here Stays Here" (Craig Stauber) discusses economic development efforts and problems on Rocky Boy's Reservation; (12) "Tribal Colleges Build to Universities" (Kathy McLaughlin) discusses the growth of Montana's tribal colleges; and (13) "In Browning, Following a New Path" (Karen Coates) which discusses dropout prevention and reentry programs on the Blackfeet Reservation. (SV)

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MONTANA'S INDIAN EDUCATION

SPECIAL REPORT

A University of Montana
School of Journalism

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MONTANA'S INDIAN EDUCATION

Bernie Azure didn't want to be an Indian.

As he emerged into the sunlight after a Saturday afternoon at the movies in Havre, he wasn't fantasizing about the shoot 'em up adventures of the Old West heroes who charged across the movie screen.

He was ashamed. He wanted to be one of the good guys. But Indians weren't the good guys, and not just in the movies.

His schoolmates sometimes taunted him about being a "dirty Indian." But more often they treated him as someone not worth a second thought.

When Bernie's mom announced that the family was moving to Fort Benton, he knew he'd found a chance to be accepted. He got ahold of a bottle of peroxide and applied it to his ink black hair. He figured if the new kids didn't know that he was Indian they might give him a chance to be one of them.

But Bernie's family didn't move. And Bernie's hair turned orange.

Few Montanans understand first-hand what struggles face Bernie Azure and the state's nearly 48,000 other Native Americans.

This report by 13 students at the Univesity of Montana School of Journalism, three of whom are Indian — including Bernie Azure — looks at one aspect of that struggle: *education*.

For all of us, education begins at birth. But for many Indians a constant component of that education is the relentless message that they don't fit in, that their views and life's experience are not to be valued. It's no surprise that a recent report published by the American Medical Association calls Indian youths "the most devastated group of adolescents in the United States."

Our report reflects some of that devastation. The consequences of a lack of education are a host of social ills. For example, half of those living on Montana's seven Indian reservations live in poverty. Many are caught up in a cycle of alcoholism and its ruinous social and medical effects.

But this report also looks at the remarkable progress being made in Montana in Indian students' formal education and its personal, social and economic payoffs.

For example, consider educators like Larry LaCounte, who, when he was superintendent of schools in Lodge Grass, found that 60 percent of the children entering kindergarten spoke Crow as their first language. By the time those students had attained fluency in English, they were so far behind academically that most were already on a path to failure. LaCounte created classrooms in which parents could choose whether they wanted their children taught primarily in Crow or in English. So while they learned new ideas in an ancient language, they also learned English, but on a timetable that bolstered their chances of success, rather than assured their likelihood of defeat.

There are many others like LaCounte and you'll read about them in the pages that follow. By helping students hang on to their tradition, they are helping Indian children rediscover who they are. And that's the most important step in helping them decide who they can become.

—Carol Van Valkenburg and Patty Reksten

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THE RELENTLESS KILLING OF A CULTURE

Jay Kipp prepares for an oral history report.

Indian boarding schools and dormitories were part of the federal government's often patchwork approach toward Indian policy. The boarding school philosophy reflected the government's belief that Indian culture held nothing worth preserving, that the best features of white life should be taught to Indians from an early age. Ideally, the teaching would be done away from home, in a professional setting, to remove the Indians from familiar suroundings, from the influence of friends and family. In effect, the teaching would "kill the Indian-ness."

Col. Richard Henry Pratt's Carlisle School in Pennsylvania, which began "recruiting" Brule Sioux in 1879, has become a dark symbol of what federal Indian boarding schools represent. Pratt supposedly had what he thought were the Indians' best interests at heart, but he believed they had to become like the white man in all things in order to succeed.

Pratt's motto was: "Kill the Indian and save the man."

The children were required to abandon not just their families, but whole identities, including their Indian names. Hair, sacred to nearly all tribes, was chopped short in the military style the schools emulated. Traditional clothing and ornaments were destroyed. Students were beaten or gagged for speaking in their native tongues.

Pratt's intent was for Indians to return home with an education to help their tribes become civilized, but few Indians made the trek back as educated Moseses, ready to lead their people from the dark ages into modern America. More often, Indians fled the schools or returned to the reservations to face ridicule and scorn for their "white-ness."

The children became lost between two worlds. Boarding schools helped separate the children from what the government considered a "heathen" environment. Whether the schools like Haskell, Flandreau, Chemawa and Genoa — attended by many Montana Indians — were boarding schools, or whether they were mission schools operated by religious orders, the aim was the same: to assimilate Indians into the white culture.

Today, only one Indian boarding facility remains in the state and it is no longer a place to send kids simply because school is too far away.

The facility, Cut Bank Boarding School, located about five miles outside Browning on Cut Bank Creek, was opened in 1905 by what is now called the Bureau of Indians Affairs, and until 1960 provided classes for Blackfeet children whose homes were far from schools. After 1960 youngsters could still live at the school, but attended classes in the Browning public schools. In the late 1970s, the dorm stopped boarding youths on the weekends. Children are now picked up Fridays after school by their parents, though some spend the weekend at the White Buffalo home for troubled adolescents.

The one boarding school that remains exists not to educate youngsters in academic pursuits, but to help Indian youths who encounter troubles at home.

"We've more or less taken on a new role," says Leonard Guardipee, the dorm's supervisor and chief guidance counselor. "We used to get kids from the creek bottoms, kids who were really isolated and just couldn't get to school each day. Now, isolation is not the factor anymore."

Sam Juneau, a Browning native and one of the dorm supervisors, says, "People don't need the dorm because they can't get to school anymore. Now they need the dorm for other reasons."

Those reasons include coping with the several social problems that plague some young Blackfeet.

Says guidance counselor Anna Fisher, "I think some kids are here because they want to be, but some kids are here because they need to be. Sometimes going home is just not worth it."

Fisher said she refers about 4 percent of the dorm's approximately 80 residents to other facilities not just for treatment of substance abuse, but to simply get the youths away from their "home environment." But, she says, such referrals don't help that much.

"We are not changing their environment because they come back to the same things," Fisher says. The "same things" include substance abuse, teen pregnancy and sexual and physical abuse at home. And, says Fisher, every dorm resident, ranging in age from 6 to 17, has experienced some of these problems.

FOR TAMMY, This home is a haven

Tammy Many Guns, a fourth grader, has been at the Cut Bank Boarding School for three-and-a-half years and has no intention of leaving anytime soon.

A native of nearby Browning, Tammy comes from a single-parent home. Her mother takes evening classes at the Browning community college and had her hands full with rearing Tammy and three other children. Only recently did the family get a home — before that, they moved around, living at different relatives' homes. For Tammy's mom, caring for all four children became too much to handle and alcoholic binges became occasional instead of rare.

Tammy made the move to the dorm on her own.

Lucy LaPlant, Tammy, and Jauna Afterbuffalo at recess.

"My mom just told me if you want to go down there, you can," she says with a shrug. "It was no big deal."

Counselor Anna Fisher says the dorm is more than just a home away from home for many of these youngsters. Unlike the boarding schools run by the federal government for most of this century, these homes are a haven.

Text by
David Zelio
Photography by
Rebecca Huntington

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THE EVOLUTION OF INDIAN EDUCATION

For generations of American Indians, education was an unhappy experience. The new nation wanted not to educate the Indian, but to remake him. Conform or be crushed. Yet even for those who conformed, the experience was crushing.

In the last 20 years, the federal government has adopted a more enlightened approach to Indian education. So while progress is steady, it comes slowly for a native people who strive to overcome the hurdle of 100 years of virtual subjugation. The lives of those whose stories follow were shaped in large part by their experiences in schools.

The work of education should begin with them while they are young and susceptible, and should continue until habits of industry and love of learning have taken the place of indolence and indifference. One of the chief defects ... has been the failure to carry them far enough, so that they might compete successfully with the white youth.... Higher education is even more essential to them than it is for white children.

Supplemental Report on Indian Education, 1889.

Jay Wise

Like Lorna Grant, working in the the medical profession was also the dream of Jay Wise, a 43-year-old senior in social work at the University of Montana. In 1968 Wise entered the university hoping to become a doctor. His dream died when his adviser told him his education was inadequate to allow him to handle the rigors of the pre-med program.

Wise said his elementary education in Lodge Pole was adequate but his high schooling was what he calls "something else." There was no public high school in Lodge Pole so he had to leave home to get more education.

In 1961 he left the Ft. Belknap Indian Reservation for Flandreau Indian Vocational High School in Flandreau, S.D.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding school's mission was to educate the students vocationally first, then academically. Wise was being trained as a welder until he began to have problems with his eyes. Halfway through his junior year he went to the superintendent of the school and asked to be allowed to take a full load of academic courses. Much to his suprise, his request was granted. "I was even given a private study room, but as I was to find out later, it was too little, too late," he said.

After a short stint at the University of Montana, Wise dropped out.

He found a job as a social worker in the San Jose area, working with the urban Indian centers, but decided to return to UM three years ago after realizing his lack of a degree made it hard to move ahead in his career. It was a hard adjustment, he said, but the Native American Studies Department helped guide him past the social and academic pitfalls that had derailed him 20 years earlier.

He also credits his ex-wife's family for reawakening his Indian pride. "I used to be ashamed to be an Indian," he said. "We were always the bad guys in the movies and in the books." Wise married into an Italian family and noticed how proud they were of their culture and he soon felt a renewed pride about his.

Lorna Grant's educational choices were limited.

Both her parents were educated at St. Paul's Mission School in Hays. They attended the Catholic school because they had only two choices, there or the Bureau of Indian Affairs boarding schools far from their homes. The mission school, located on the southern edge of the Fort Belknap Reservation, was established in September 1887 under the direction of the Ursuline sisters. It was a part of the government's plan to assimilate the American Indian into the white society through education and religion.

Lorna Grant

Grant's father attended the school at the Jesuit mission when it was still a boarding school in the 1920s. Her mother attended the school after it had changed to a day school and after the Sisters of St. Francis took over in 1936.

"My father and mother used to tell me horror stories about the treatment they received at the hands of the nuns and priests," she said. "They were beaten for speaking their Indian language. They were stripped of their identity and worked like slaves."

Building maintenance and cleaning, farm and ranch labor, kitchen duties, sewing, and washing clothes were daily chores.

Grant entered the mission day school in 1948. Her parents sent her there so she could be close to home, so she could be fed fairly decently and in part because of learned habits. For Lorna, it was not a happy choice.

"The education I received has not served me well," Grant said. "I was taught to be a good Christian and a good domestic."

She attended the first four grades at the mission school. "My mother thought I wasn't learning enough of the basics" at the mission school, so she put her daughter in the Hays public school from fifth through eighth grade. "There was some good teachers — no Indian teachers yet — but there was not the emphasis on physical punishment for being Indian," Grant said.

But because there was no high school in Hays, Grant went back to the mission school.

"I was outspoken so I received a lot of physical punishment and it seemed as though I was constantly praying for forgiveness," she said. However, things were changing. "In my later high school years a priest by the name of Father Robinson came to the school and he encouraged us to be proud of our heritage."

Grant is now enrolled in the nursing program at the Salish-Kootenai Community College in Pablo. She laments that her educational background makes her studies a bit more difficult but is determined to get a degree.

The girl who has learned only the rudiments of reading, writing and ciphering, but knows also how to make and mend her clothing, to wash and iron, and to cook her husband's dinner will be worth vastly more as a mistress of a log cabin than one who has given years of study to [academics] alone.

Text by
Bernard L. Azure
Photography by
Daniel Bennett

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Text by Bernard L. Azure
Photography by Daniel Bennett

The truth is that the Indian has as distinct an individuality as any type of man who ever lived, and he will never be judged aright till we learn to measure him by his own standards, as we whites would wish to be measured if some more powerful race were to usurp dominion over us.

Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1905.

17-year-old Claire Charlo has certain expectations of herself. "Since I was 9 years old I knew I wanted to be a lawyer," she said. Charlo graduated this spring from Arlee High School and took off to France for a three-week tour and educational program, accompanied by her French teacher, Ethel McDonald, and three other students. She is working in New York this summer before entering college in the fall. She said she'll either attend Carroll College in Helena or Cornell College in Mount Vernon, Iowa.

The first eight years of her education were spent at home being

Claire Charlo

taught by her mother, Jan, a certified teacher. She said she felt somewhat socially isolated because of that but credits her mom, her grandmother Joan Christopherson, and her father, Vic, for providing her with a good educational foundation.

"My grandmother is also a teacher and she encouraged us to have a broad world view," she said. "She would engage us in political and social discussions like adults." Although her parents were divorced when she was 7, her father, a poet and author, was still a strong positive force in her life, instilling in her the value of creativity.

After the initial shock of going to public school, Charlo fit right in. She said she soon overcame her shyness and found her niche among the rebels and had fun. However, by her sophomore year some of her friends became pregnant and left school or dropped out and partied. It was time for a reality check.

"I was mad at my friends, at some of the teachers who said "that's Indian girls for you" and I became very discouraged. I also started to notice racism a little bit more in some of the teachers and students," she said.

She said it took her awhile to overcome the disappointments of reality but when she did she became more focused on her goals and put academics in their proper place. Charlo said she is tired of the parties. "It's always the same thing and the same people and it's old already," she said.

"I want to get off the reservation. There is a lot of racism here. You can feel it sometimes and you can certainly hear it othertimes," she said.

"Even some of the teachers are very ignorant of Indians and their history and their rights."

Nearly 90 percent of the adult Indians living on the portion of the Crow Reservation that extends into Yellowstone County are high school graduates. More than a quarter have also earned a college degree.

United States Bureau of the Census, 1990.

Pride, confidence and determination immediatly bubble to the surface when Eldena Bear Don't Walk expresses herself. The 18-year-old journalism major at UM has to look no further than her parents for inspiration and role models. They are both college graduates. Her father, Urban, is a lawyer in Billings, and her mother, Marjorie, is an administrator in the Indian Health Service there.

Because of her parents'

Eldena Bear Don't Walk

educational pursuits and careers, Eldena was not raised on a reservation. She attended public school in Billings and graduated from Senior High in 1991. She said that the school prepared her very well academically and socially for college.

The step to college was natural for her, she said, because it was a natural progression that was expected of her by her parents. Her brother, Scott, was already at UM and he helped her smooth out any rough spots in the transition.

She wants to be judged by what she does, not by who she is. "I just want to be treated the same as everyone else," Bear Don't Walk said, but being an Indian with an obvious Indian name has always brought her attention.

"Because I was active in school and a fairly good student I was considered an exception to the rule, not the typical Indian," she said, referring to the ease with which some want to stereotype people.

She found the stereotype persists now that she's in college.

"I had hoped that in college that those kind of things would change but some people still make fun of my name or make racial comments about Indians that are based in ignorance," she said.

But Bear Don't Walk said the ignorance she encounters comes not just from whites. Some Indians make obvious their feeling that because she is receiving a college education she is somehow better than they are. Many Indians have certain expectations of other Indians and if a person goes beyond them they are seen as sellouts or labeled white, she said.

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URBAN INDIANS TRY TO HANG ON TO ANCIENT WAYS

Text by
Sharon Alton Moses

Joe Whitehawk is teaching four little boys the art of drumming. These youngsters, ages 5 to 12, are his regulars and though they seem self-conscious, his gentle manner is reassuring and they are eager to learn the songs. It's important, he says to their attentive little faces, that they don't throw off the singer (himself) with a mistimed drum beat. It could make the song sound "really strange," he says. The little boys grin.

Whitehawk is a soft-spoken Lakota man with a relaxing sense of humor. But his gentle manner has a flinty edge when the Vietnam veteran speaks of his weariness of political wars and people dehumanizing each other. So Whitehawk has found a way to help a people value one another in his job as a cultural specialist at the Native American Services Agency.

Whitehawk offers cultural classes to some of the 3,100 Indians in the Missoula area, many of whom are struggling to hang on to their native identities in a place that for most is far from home and family.

Tuesday and Thursday nights there is little to distinguish the agency from neighboring businesses like the car wash and the day care center. The agency's sign isn't a neon contraption that broadcasts its importance around the clock. It is handpainted and goes to bed with the sun.

But inside, Whitehawk is teaching traditional dancing and singing. As he patiently explains techniques to the boys, some of the girls complain about the lull in the drumming. They want a livelier song to accompany their dancing and lament that they do not know all the steps. Whitehawk grabs a shawl and declares he could put them all to shame. In a flurry of color, he leaps onto the dance floor and demonstrates several steps. It's hard to discern who's giggling the most, Whitehawk or his pupils.

On other nights he oversees the craft workshop on beading and in designing costumes for dancing. The only requirement is a desire to learn. Whitehawk is familiar with Lakota designs and has exposure to other cultures through travel and friends of different tribal backgrounds. For tribes he is less familiar with, he relies on books and tapes as references to instruct pupils wanting to learn designs specific to their backgrounds.

The agency's cultural and spiritual program has grown extensively in the little more than a year since it began.

"We started out with a budget of about $3,000," Whitehawk explains. Government officials who determine funding for Indian programs didn't really think of the culture program as a basic need, akin to health services also offered at the agency. Whitehawk says he was uncertain whether the program would live beyond the first anniversary of its birth.

The program ran out of funds before the year's end, and Whitehawk spent his own money purchasing beads, leather and other supplies. Starting with only 10 children, the program blossomed to nearly 80 children that first year. Parents, themselves displaced Indians often a generation removed from reservation life, began showing an interest in the program. It wasn't long before they began to participate with their children in learning more about their own cultures or dancing and singing or getting involved in craftwork.

The constraints of the house made itself felt with Whitehawk's growing clientele. Sometimes Whitehawk had to divide the groups in half, putting dancing and drumming students upstairs and the beaders and other craft workers in the basement in order to accommodate them all.

The program's popularity relates in part to the fact Whitehawk's approach to teaching traditional arts is rooted deeply in Indian spiritual ideals. "Society doesn't understand how central spirituality is to us," says Whitehawk. "It's in all parts of our culture; it's a part of our daily lives."

This night several women, a Yaqui and Choctaw among them, are beading designs for moccasins and other adornments. Jonathan Pretty On Top, a Crow, meticulously works on his roach, a headpiece worn when dancing.

Sometimes, even the act of creating these things is wrapped in spiritual significance, says Laurel Ashcraft, a Lakota. The colors chosen sometimes come to the individual in dreams. To fulfill the creation of the object, the designer is in direct communication with that spiritual part of her and her Creator, she says. "It's a feeling of wholeness that many Indians need but are missing," adds Whitehawk.

Sam Windy Boy, a Cree spiritual man, built a sweat lodge for the agency on the outskirts of Missoula near Miller Creek. Both Windy Boy and Whitehawk conduct the sweat lodge purification and prayer ceremonies regularly. Windy Boy occasionally volunteers his time at the agency to assist Whitehawk in teaching drumming and singing.

"People enter the program at whatever point they need the most help with," says Whitehawk. "It doesn't matter where they enter, it's all a part of the circle."

This holistic ideal of physical, emotional and spiritual well-being is the most successful approach, according to Whitehawk, to prevent self-destructive behavior.

Excessive drinking and domestic abuse are symptoms of frustration and low self-esteem, Whitehawk believes. Indian pride can keep life in the proper perspective, he says.

The agency also tries to provide a sense of community so important to Indians who may miss that extended family feeling, living in a society that emphasizes individuality and singular families. Indian culture has a place for everyone to participate, says Whitehawk.

But merely stating these ideals from the Indian point of view is not enough to convince governmental bodies of the validity of funding such programs. This has not been lost on Whitehawk, who has kept this program under the agency's rehabilitation program budget.

By keeping records of participation, expenses, program growth and the effects on morale in conjunction with those rehabilitation programs, Whitehawk succeeded in more than tripling the cultural program's funding for 1991-1992. It's an accomplishment he hopes will continue.

The drumming and dancing send vibrations down through the floor to the craftworkers in the basement. It's contagious. Some of those beading find themselves toe tapping to the drum upstairs. Children too young to participate run in and out, playing amongst the storage boxes, shrieking with laughter in their latest game of tag. No one notices the street noises outside: the occasional honk of impatient drivers or the drone of tires on pavement.

By evening's end, this urban extended family breaks up and prepares to go home. All come away with a little of the spirit they contributed and feeling good about themselves. They climb into their four-wheeled ponies and wend their way home.

IN BOX ELDER, CULTIVATING CULTURAL AWARENESS

The moment Pat Chiefstick begins speaking, 12 teenage voices hush. The students stop fidgeting and focus only on what he is saying.

In his low, raspy voice, he tells the Indian story of creation. He describes the power of Native American religious symbols like sweetgrass, the sweat ceremony and the medicine wheel. "These are the things that are important," Chiefstick says.

The students listen intently as he speaks of an Indian woman with tuberculosis whose life was saved by a sun dance ceremony.

He reminds the class to respect traditional Indian ways and talks of the importance of spirituality.

"Never forget that you're an Indian," he says.

When the bell rings at the end of class, the students are reluctant to leave the room. They want more.

Chiefstick and other tribal elders speak to the students at the Box Elder School as part of a program that uses traditional Indian ceremonies and culture to help students avoid alcohol and drugs.

"It's a known fact that some elders should talk to children like this," Chiefstick says. "Teach them to respect one another, teach them right from wrong. They've got to know where they came from."

Cultural programs like the one in Box Elder are fairly common at reservation schools in Montana, according to Bob Parsley, coordinator of Indian affairs for the Office of Public Instruction in Helena.

Parsley thinks the programs have some effect. "The kids seem to have a lot of respect for tribal elders," he says.

The idea for cultural education came to Box Elder school when drug and alcohol counselor Joe Tobiness was hired in 1990. Principal John Loucks hired Tobiness on a trial basis to deal with the "number one issue" in Box Elder — drug and alcohol abuse.

But many links to the Native American past are dying with those tribal elders. The native language is disappearing and traditional ceremonies have lost their meaning for some.

Text by Kathy McLaughlin

Kids were skipping school regularly because of hangovers from partying they had done on the weekend, Loucks said. School officials were so concerned about the abuse that they created a full-time position for a drug and alcohol counselor.

"Joe has given the kids a Native American figure they can relate to," Loucks says. "I think he can reach a lot of kids."

Tobiness wants the kids to know that alcohol was never a part of traditional Native American culture.

"Alcohol is a mind crippler," he says. "It makes us invalids in our spirituality."

He has spoken one-on-one about alcohol-related problems with about half of the 58 high school students at the school that includes kindergarten through 12th grade.

But the program doesn't begin in high school. All 225 students at the school are taught the dangers of alcohol and drug abuse from the time they enter kindergarten.

Kathy Henry, an area resident with three children at Box Elder School, says that starting in the lower grades helps. "When they're in high school, there isn't much [you can do] to change their minds," she explains.

Tobiness tries to use traditional Native American religion and culture in his attempt to help the students stay sober. Exploring his own Indian heritage helped him stop drinking.

He began experimenting with alcohol at age 14 while growing up on the Rocky Boy's Reservation.

"My drinking had increased to the point where I was suffering blackouts and doing crazy things," he says. "First it was fun. Then it was fun and problems, and then later it was nothing but problems."

He turned to an Indian alcohol program in Butte for help. "Initially I was very afraid and self-conscious to go in there," he says.

Discovering his Native American roots gave Tobiness more pride in himself. That self-confidence helps him stay sober.

He wants the kids in Box Elder to experience the same connection to their culture.

One of his first projects when he began at Box Elder in 1990 was to build a sweat lodge for students behind the school. The sweat lodge provides students with an opportunity to experience a traditional Indian religious ceremony of purification.

The lodge is a round hut that stands about 4 feet high at the top. Outside, the frame is covered by blankets, to hold in heat. During the ceremony water is poured over heated rocks until the temperature reaches up to 200 degrees. Those participating in the sweat recite prayers and sing in the darkness of the covered lodge.

Students may participate in sweats at the school before athletic events, on special holidays or when they just want to pray, Tobiness says. The kids also use eagle feathers and burn sweetgrass during the sweat.

John Favel, a freshman at Box Elder, likes to sweat when he is feeling "stressed out."

"It helps me clear my mind sometimes when I have a problem," he says.

Jason LaMere, a senior at Box Elder, says he doesn't believe in the old ways and superstitions of his parents and grandparents. Pow-wows held on the reservation every spring have lost their spiritual meaning, some of the teen-agers say.

"To the younger ones, it's just a time to party and live it up," 16-year-old Warren Chief Goes Out says. The older tribal members who sing and dance are only concerned with winning prize money, he adds.

Chief Goes Out started drinking when he was in grade school. Since coming to Tobiness' alcohol group, he thinks more these days about the problems alcohol have caused the Chippewa-Cree people. "It's pretty bad, I guess. It's really messed up a lot of good people," he says.

Drinking starts early for many youngsters. "On the res, it's really easy for juveniles to drink," he says, telling about how there's always someone willing to buy Black Velvet or Southern Comfort for youngsters out to have a good time.

He knows there are consequences. "You can get thrown in the tank for a while," he says, but "you go out, do it again, and hope that you don't get caught."

Chief Goes Out wants to make something of himself. He wants to go to college. But he knows others have had similar goals and failed.

"I might just be another drunk on the res," he says, looking at the ground.

With so many factors against him and his students, Tobiness knows he can't change things overnight.

But Tobiness measures successes in small increments. One measure is a change in attitude. Thoughts of success. A willingness to talk about problems. A desire to work for solutions and not accept the status quo as insurmountable.

"We're not going to have brand-new perfect kids," he says.

But what he asks of the youngsters is to look at who they are and imagine who they can be.

"It's being real, talking about reality," he says. "And sometimes it's harsh."

ELMER MAIN:

Struggling to salvage a language nearly lost

Text by
Sharon Alton Moses

He pulls two spiral bound notebooks from his desk, worn at the corners and written in his own longhand. This is all he has as a reference — his own catalog of words from memory, grouped by catagory such as money, , time, family, and religion.

The expression on Elmer Main's face is uncompromising, like chisled granite. He speaks with a voice that is is gruff but direct. Some of what he speaks are words nearly lost to history.

His Indian name is Oh-Wah-Tan-Neh, Black Raven, he says. He is of the White Clay People, which is the name he says his tribe called itself before the French came along and tagged his people the "big bellies," or Gros Ventre.

"The Gros Ventre language is lost," he says. "We're just trying to salvage some of it."

Main, the bilingual director of the Fort Belknap Community College, is one of the last of the Gros Ventre who can speak the language fluently. He tries to pass on that ancestral link in the college's one classroom which shares building space with the neighborhood grocery store.

Just after World War II there were still enough elders who could speak the langage and were willing to teach anyone who wanted to learn. But back then "it was a bad thing to be an Indian," says Main quietly. There was no interest among the younger people.

It was the boarding school and missionary school era, he explains. The federal government was determined to force Native Americans to assimilate into mainstream society. Children were sent to boarding schools away from their families. "We were supposed to stop being Indian," says Main.

His father received a fourth grade education and his mother went as far as the 10th grade in an Oregon boarding school.

Main, who was born in a tent in Hays, says he received a good education from the Franciscan sisters and Jesuit priests who ran St. Paul's Mission in Hays, where he attended class from grade school through high school, but they were very strict.

Suddenly a memory triggers a smile, and the granite countenance is broken. He chuckles a bit and his eyes sparkle when he says, "I got in lots of trouble for chewing gum, not paying attention and not memorizing the catechism!"

Main became the first Gros Ventre to go to college. He attended Gonzaga University in Spokane and graduated from the University of Montana. He earned bachelor's degrees in education and biology and a master's degree in education administration.

But the education Main treasures is cultural. It is his people's link to their past, their sense of who they are. It is that awareness that guides his quest to keep the cultural traditions intact. He notes wistfully that most of the elders who knew the language and traditions are dead.

"Once a tribe loses its language, it loses its culture," he says. "I think it's too late," he adds, his voice trailing off.

Despite those sentiments, Main says he believes in his program. He can't restore what has been silenced with the passing of the elders, but he can salvage what is left.

Gros Ventre was originally only about 800 words, says Main. It's a changing language now. As technology advances and new things come into use, the language must adapt, adopting new terms to describe those things. For instance, Main points out that since there was no term for "telephone," the Gros Ventre translation of it is "hit-that-wire." The word for "dime" translates into "thin-piece-of-metal," and so forth.

Main teaches the language without texts. There was once a book of collected terms printed by someone who researched the Gros Ventre, he recalls. But it was "all messed up," says Main, waving a dismissing hand and shaking his head at the recollection.

He pulls two spiral-bound notebooks from his desk, worn at the corners and written in his own longhand. This is all he has as a reference — his own catalog of words from memory, grouped by catagory such as money, time, family, and religion. He teaches the words phonetically because there are no written guidelines for Gros Ventre.

The lanuguage reflects the nuances of Gros Ventre values: phrases for men and women speaking to one another with respect, the differences between the living and "that which is no longer," spiritual references in everyday words alluding to a culture with spiritual concepts enmeshed in daily life.

So much is changing in today's world, says Main. Some changes are hard for him to accept. The sun dance, a religious ceremony held for vows and prayer, differentiated "men's territory" from that of women, according to Main, and laid out specific roles for participants. Now, women fill some of those traditionally male roles. Main isn't sure he can accept such changes. He is glad however, that the young people are gaining interest in tradition again.

Despite the return to embracing old beliefs, Main urges those with an education to leave the reservation. Jobs are sparse and land is limited at Fort Belknap, he says.

"Maybe they should cut their hair, mix in with society, and present themselves as professionals," he says.

Yet Main returned to his reservation. He says he wants to pass on what he knows before it is gone forever.

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MINERVA ALLEN: INSTILLING PRIDE IN A PEOPLE

Fighting for a future by preserving the past

Text by
Sharon Alton Moses

Minerva Allen had a fight on her hands when she began teaching Gros Ventre and Assiniboine words in the Hays and Lodge Pole schools.

Some Indian parents didn't want their children to learn their native language.

But Allen, the director of the schools' bilingual program and president of the Montana Bilingual Education Association, is nothing if not a fighter. And she understood the problem.

Those parents had accepted the view taught to them in boarding schools that being an Indian was bad, she explains.

"They saw themselves as old, dumb Indians," she says. "They didn't want that for their children."

But Allen, who has spent 24 years in education, was convinced of the importance of letting the children live their culture and take pride in who they are. She ultimately persuaded the parents that reaching into the past didn't mean ignoring the present and abandoning the future.

"We have to change with the times," she says emphatically, "but we have to do it for ourselves."

Allen is a big woman and her Assiniboine face dances with a smile most of the time. Sometimes she punctuates her sentences with an exuberant "Ha!" and slams her hand down on the desktop for emphasis.

Allen and teachers like her are toiling to undo some of the damage done in mission schools, when the accepted practice, encouraged by the federal government, was to rub out all things Indian.

Years ago when she attended, she says, the teachers were rigid and punished those who held onto Indian ways instead of accepting Christian teachings. Allen says it seemed to her that they were more obsessed with sex than anything else and watched over their students "like hawks."

"Look out, that causes babies!" she squeals in mock imitation.

But she's also quick to recount stories of some nuns and priests who respected the students and their culture.

Some of the nuns took an interest in Indian spirituality and even attended some sun dances, she says. One priest, whom Allen speaks of with fondness and admiration, incorporated Indian values and tradition with Christian ideals in his teaching. He was wonderful, she says, and he risked admonition from his superiors to do such a thing.

Teachers must do more than reacquaint students with their heritage, Allen says. Students need teachers who can understand their problems, but that is difficult when there is a cultural barrier.

Today Allen knows that teachers must do more than just reacquaint students with their heritage. She has seen too many students drop out and get caught up in a losing cycle of no education, no job and sometimes babies to feed. Students need teachers who understand their difficulties and can relate, and who can offer practical advice, she says. But doing that is difficult when there is a cultural barrier or a lack of cultural understanding, Allen believes.

Allen has worked exclusively in school systems on the reservation. Each of her three daughters also works for the Hays/Lodge Pole schools.

At one time the majority of teachers on the reservation were white, she says. Now, the majority are Indian.

Once, few Indian symbols or art were visible anywhere in school. Today, classrooms have videotapes of elders telling stories and history in the oral tradition. Students can check them out as part of their education.

Feathers, glue, beads and leather are common items stored at the back of classrooms. Craft projects that teach native designs are incorporated into history lessons or wherever they can be applied. Along the top of the blackboard where the alphabet is displayed, there are also illustrations of a man and woman, dog and cat, and other common articles. Captions are in English and Gros-Ventre or Assiniboine.

During the day, teachers will explain things to the children in English, then repeat it in the native language, says Allen. The children pick up on it fast.

And what of those parents who protested the bilingual program when it began 12 years ago? Now, says Allen, parents and grandparents come into the classrooms to participate in the craft projects or share stories. The parents have seen how their children are responding to their culture and they like it.

"Them Indians know what they're doin'!" she bellows with obvious delight, punctuating her statement with a final "Ha!"

It's the only reservation in Montana without a public high school. For many Indian students it means long, boring hours on the bus. For others it means a fight to change the system.

NO SCHOOL IN THESE PARTS

Text by Karen Coates

At 6:20 a.m. the sun hasn't begun to cast its first rays on the rolling hills of the Northern Cheyenne Reservation. The fog is thick and the air is chilling. Far off in the distance two headlights cut across the expansive land. It's the only sign of life this early morning.

But inside the ranch home of Jackie Small, three teen-agers and their mother move quickly. Biscuits and gravy are hot on the table, but the girls — Sheryl, Sharon and Shelly — barely have time to stuff a few bites into their mouths. They'll finish breakfast on the bus. They'll also catch up on some sleep; there's not much better to do during the two-hour ride to school.

The Small girls travel 120 miles daily between their home on the Northern Cheyenne Reservation and their schools in Colstrip. The reservation is the only one of Montana's seven that doesn't have its own public high school. There is a Catholic high school, St. Labre in Ashland, on the reservation's eastern edge. And Busby high school, run by the federal Bureau of Indian Affairs, is on the reservation, but many say it is so underfunded that it cannot give its 50 students an adequate education.

So Jackie Small feels her daughters must take the long bus ride each morning to get the kind of education she wants for them. Besides, she says it's good for her daughters to get going so early in the morning.

"When the kids get older, they'll know what it's like to get up and go to work," she says.

The girls say that while it would be nice to sleep a bit longer in the mornings, they're used to making the trek to Colstrip. They've made friends easily with both whites and Indians. Sharon and Shelly, who aren't yet in high school, have the option of staying on the reservation for grade school, but they prefer Colstrip and their mother believes even at the elementary level there is a better quality of education in Colstrip.

But others staunchly disagree. Sixteen-year-old Jason Kaline tried attending school in Colstrip, but wasn't happy there. He left Colstrip, with a school population that is two-thirds white, to attend St. Labre, which is almost entirely Indian. He says the all-white school board and the white teachers at Colstrip made little effort to understand Indian culture and history.

Although Jason is half white and looks more white than Indian, he says he doesn't feel as though he fit into the white niche of Colstrip.

And that is precisely the point to many Northern Cheyenne. Their kids shouldn't have to fit into a school that isn't theirs.

Bob McNeel, the superintendent of the reservation's Lame Deer school system, says a link is missing. The reservation has a public grade school and a tribal community college, but a public high school does not exist, despite the 200 to 400 teen-agers who might attend.

"In Montana, that's a good-sized high school," he says. "Logically speaking, it makes absolutely no sense."

McNeel, who is white, says the real reason for the missing link — the reason many people won't dare say aloud — is the white man's belief that the Indians couldn't successfully run a school on their own, and the notion that the Northern Cheyenne are better off leaving the authority in the hands of white people. McNeel, who has adopted children of several races, says different does not mean subordinate.

Gail Small, a tribal lawyer who has been leading a fight that began 26 years ago for a school on the reservation, agrees that "the old mentality — Indians not knowing what's good for them" prevails even today. She says tribal council elections are held every two years, and each council since the 1960s has passed a resolution in support of a public high school.

Small says financial constraints have resulted in failed attempts at securing a school. For a tribe with little money, expert witnesses are costly. She says the reservation is located within two of the wealthiest counties in the state — Bighorn and Rosebud — and county school administrators want to keep the Indian population in their schools. The districts receive state and — in the case of Indian children — federal money, based on the number of students enrolled. Administrators worry that the quality of their schools will suffer enormously if several hundred children leave to attend high school on the reservation.

Small says public hearings regarding whether to establish a school on the reservation were "conveniently" located away from the Northern Cheyenne reservation, in Hardin and Forsyth.

"Made us travel 65 miles in either direction to get to these hearings," she says. "That's a lot of money just getting our people there. The barriers they throw before you are formidable."

Given the conservative political climate of the two counties, she says, the tribe was not surprised when Rosebud and Bighorn school administrators denied requests for a public high school on the reservation.

But Sharyn Thomas, the superintendent of the Rosebud County school system, says she denied the request because the Northern Cheyenne kids have other options; they don't need a state high school on the reservation.

"Just because they're the only one without a high school isn't a justification to have one," she says.

She adds that the high school in Busby is on the reservation and Indian kids have that option of staying close to home.

But Archie Alexander, the attorney representing the tribe in the case, says the high school can barely be called such because internal conflicts at the BIA have kept funding at a bare minimum. Each Busby high school student is funded with $2,538 from the BIA, he says, but the average spending per high school student in Montana is $4,000 to $5,000. At Colstrip, the wealthiest school district in the state, that figure jumps to $6,373, he says.

Alexander says a 1991 BIA report, which studied all of the bureau's schools in the nation, called BIA schools "overcrowded, unsafe and educationally obsolete."

"The schools are grossly underfunded," Alexander says. In addition, he says, the Busby high school building was shut down years ago because there wasn't enough money to keep it open. Now high school and elementary students share space.

But Thomas says if a new high school is built on the reservation, the other schools will lose their Indian students and the state money paid for each student enrolled, and the quality of education will decline.

Yet the tribe is planning as though a school is a sure thing. Small says she can't give away their tactics because they're confidential. But about 80 acres have been set aside, and people from the MSU architecture program have agreed to design the building, she says. Because of a high dropout rate, the Northern Cheyenne is even at the top of a Congressional list for annually appropriated money to build schools on reservations, she says.

"Clearly I think the Northern Cheyenne people have the right to local community control of their education," she says. "If you take away the fact that we are Indian, I think that any community in Montana is guaranteed the right to local community control of their education, and that's what we're after."

All six of the school board members in Colstrip are white, including the reservation representative; he is married to an Indian.

Small says the biggest barrier — the conservative white man — is still in their way.

She says it all goes back to a mentality that says "we shouldn't keep all the Indian kids together; we have to assimilate. The Indian kids got to start learning how to deal with the white kids. They got to give up their language, give up their traditions, their culture, because that's the American way."

But Carol Wicker, principal of Colstrip High School, says administrators are trying to preserve some Indian culture. She says Indian history is integrated into several literature and government classes, and next year the school will provide a class dedicated to American Indian history. The teachers are learning too, she says. New teachers attend an orientation, and one section deals specifically with the needs of Indian students.

Wicker says she supports any curriculum, any program that is good for the students. If it were in the best interest of the students to have a high school on the reservation, she says she would endorse it. The Colstrip high school is the envy of school administrators statewide. It is a first-rate facility with amenities that many colleges could not afford. The school was funded with the windfall realized when strip-mining brought economic prosperity to Bighorn County. Wicker says taking youngsters out of the Colstrip school system and putting them in a poorer school on the reservation won't do the children any good.

She also says the Indian and white societies should be working and growing together, not drifting apart.

"There's a lot of importance to holding onto your roots," she says. "But the life that these students are going to live is going to be more and more intertwined with the other cultures. I think less and less and less people on the reservation are going to be able to function isolated. And now we want to voluntarily go back to that?"

But Gail Small has the answer to that question: one child may feel more comfortable with people who share a common history, culture, lifestyle and appearance. For another child, she says, a conglomerate of cultural and physical differences may create a better and more diverse learning atmosphere. Neither is right nor wrong, she emphasizes, but each child should have a choice.

Yet at 8 p.m., the sky is dark and hardly a sound is heard on the open lands of the reservation. A bus rolls into Ashland, miles from the Smalls' home, to drop off the kids who stayed for after-school activities in Colstrip. This is as far as Sheryl Small can ride; the activity bus doesn't provide her with door-to-door service at night.

Sheryl may not mind spending more time off the reservation than on it. She may not care that it was dark when she left for high school in the morning and it is dark when she returns. Even spending one-sixth of her day on a bus just to get to and from a public high school may not bother her. But Sheryl Small has little choice.

Text by
Karen Coates
Photography by
Dan McComb

Isaac Washington

'I'm not their color'

Look into 9-year-old Isaac Washington's eyes and you'll see the pain when he talks about school.

But it's hard even to get a glimpse of those glassy brown eyes. He looks at the floor when he tells you how frustrating it is for an Indian kid trying to make friends with the white kids in fourth grade.

"They just kept on saying I didn't belong there, and I wasn't supposed to be there," he recalls.

"They would say that we looked like girls because we had long hair."

So he cut his black braids, but it didn't make any difference. Even though the Colstrip shool system is about one-third Indian, those with dark skin are often treated as outsiders.

Isaac says he's pretty sure he knows why some of his classmates ostracize him, even though he doesn't understand it.

"Probably because I'm not their color."

But he doesn't feel any different from them on the inside, he says. His face may have a different hue, but the face of Isaac Washington doesn't reveal a lot about the person beneath the skin.

Isaac's mother, Viola Washington, says her son tries to make friends with everyone he meets. He has an openness that often leaves him vulnerable and easily hurt by rejection.

But Viola says she drills it into the minds of her six children that they should never let someone judge them by the color of their skin.

"You're just as good as them — and prove it!" she reminds them over and over. But, she cautions: "Not in a bad way but a good way."

She says that what her kids know about Indians and whites and the tension that festers in a mixed society, they learned outside the home.

"In fact, they didn't really observe the difference" between races, she said, "because I never taught them that."

But as long as some parents keep passing racist mindsets on to their children, Viola says, kids like Isaac will be left struggling for answers.

Isaac says he doesn't know what the solution is, but thinks results will have to come right from the top. Who can teach America's youngsters that love is colorblind?

"The president," he answers fervently without hesitation. And for a few brief moments he raises his eyes.

Isaac doesn't know what our leaders can say to change his bigoted world. He just wants it to happen.

Isaac Washington just wants to be a child. His mom wants to see him smile.

THE DAY JAMIE ALMOST DIED

Fourteen-year-old Jamie can't remember when alcohol stopped being fun and started being necessary, but she remembers how last summer it almost killed her.

"If they hadn't found me I would have died," she says in her soft voice. "It really scared me because my brother had died of an alcohol overdose when he was 13."

Jamie lost consciousness that summer day. Her blood alcohol level was almost lethal. That scared her enough that in September, the Ronan ninth grader entered a six-week program for adolescents with substance abuse problems, sponsored by Flathead Tribal Human Services.

For the first three weeks, she, along with several other girls from the reservation, went through detoxification and therapy at Glacier View Hospital in Kalispell. The girls then spent 21 days at Blue Bay Healing Center on Flathead Lake, an innovative program that helps kids discover alternatives to drinking and drugs, in part by introducing them to traditional native values.

Alcohol abuse is killing Indian youngsters like Jamie. An American Medical Association report published recently found enormous health problems exist among Indian adolescents, and many of the difficulties are related to alcohol. The AMA found that Indian teenagers are twice as likely as other youngsters to die during their youth. One researcher called Indian youngsters "the most devastated group of adolescents in the United States."

"The great disaster of Indians in the 1920s and '30s was TB. The great disaster of Indians today is alcohol and drugs."

Thomas "Bearhead" Swaney, director of Flathead Tribal Human Services

Text by Elizabeth Ichizawa

Jamie is in recovery now, but recovery from addiction is a gravelly slope on which it's easy to slide down on your way up, and having alcoholic parents makes the slope steeper. Jamie worries about her folks, especially her father — what he's doing with his check, whether he's going to get "rolled" for it.

So although she is trying not to drink, she says, "I can't really say I've been completely sober lately."

Jamie's friend Donna is 13, but seems older, tough-edged. She figures she began drinking at age 6 or 7, finishing off half-empty glasses of beer and booze the adults left around.

At the insistence of her mother, Donna entered Blue Bay when Jamie did, though with more ambivalence than did her friend.

"The treatment plan doesn't work if people don't want to be there," she says. "That's how I was. I was like, 'no way I'm going to sober up.' So when I got to Blue Bay, there I was, sitting in a little room with my cousin, smoking a joint."

Still, the program made a difference. After several lapses, she's been sober for about four months.

Donna says her mother has been an alcoholic "since I was born." She says she was always worrying about whether her mother would get into a car accident, or get beat up. Now that her mother is sober, Donna worries less.

Jamie's and Donna's experiences are not unique. Drug and alcohol use among Native American children and adolescents is pervasive on Montana's reservations.

Thomas "Bearhead" Swaney, director of Flathead Tribal Human Services, says alcoholism is a major health problem among Indian people, and statistics like those published by the AMA back that up. Alcohol-related mortality rates among Native Americans are significantly higher than among the general population. Thirty-five percent of all Indian deaths involve alcohol, and five of the leading 10 killers of Indian people — auto accidents, cirrhosis of the liver, clinical alcoholism, suicide and homicide — are alcohol-related.

"The great disaster of Indians in the 1920s and '30s was TB," Swaney says. "The great disaster of Indians today is alcohol and drugs."

Renee Roullier, a counselor who has worked with troubled youngsters through the Flathead's Alcohol and Substance Abuse Program (ASAP), says substance use among the young reflects that among the Indian community as a whole, and has roots in the historical devastation of traditional culture, from which Indian people are just beginning to emerge.

She says the notorious allotment policies of the federal government during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which forced tribes to give up their communal land and ways, and ultimately caused many to become dependent on the government, eroded Indians' self-esteem. The policy of taking Indian children from their homes and placing them in white-run boarding schools, where ties to tribe and family were systematically severed, and where physical abuse was rampant, traumatized generations of Native Americans and set the stage for many of the problems with which Indian people now grapple, including substance abuse.

"We have the grief of a people, that shared consciousness of grief and anger," she says. "What we need is to work through that grief, because as long as we hold onto it, we'll be killing ourselves."

Roullier says Indian kids today feel "caught between two worlds," creating in them both confusion and anger.

Gary Frost, another ASAP counselor who works at the Kaleidoscope Drug Center in Ronan, makes the same observation.

"Without their own culture, they are in purgatory," he says. "They say 'I'm not white, I'm not really Indian, I'm nothing.'"

Frost see the results of cultural and family disintegration every day. His caseload includes kids who regularly sniff glue and other

Indian teenagers are twice as likely as other youngsters to die during their youth.

For some Indian children, staying in school is not the most important issue. Staying alive is.

toxic chemicals, kids with fetal alcohol syndrome (physical and intellectual impairments caused by exposure to large amounts of alcohol in utero), kids who as babies were fed alcohol in their bottles to keep them quiet, kids abused and neglected, kids on booze, crack, hallucinogenics, I.V. and prescription drugs. And Frost says that for every child who comes into his office,"there are 10 or 15 or 20 others out there who have the same issues."

"The problem is one of multi-generational dysfunction," he says, noting that most of the youngsters he sees are children of alcoholics. "It's pernicious as hell," he says.

Frost says children in families with severe problems will sometimes be placed in foster care, but it may mean they are subject to more family chaos, neglect or abuse.

"These kids develop calluses an inch thick on their hearts and souls," he says.

There are patterns among kids who come from alcoholic homes, Roullier says. As with Donna, many small children start drinking the alcohol left lying around the house by adults. "We're talking about 3 and 4 years old sometimes," she adds. Or parents might initiate small kids into drinking.

Like Jamie and Donna, youngsters growing up in alcoholic homes often become what Roullier calls "parentafied." They worry about their parents, particularly if the adult places the child in the role of confidant. "In a sense they miss their childhood. These kids learn from an early age, don't talk, don't trust, don't feel. We liken growing up in an alcoholic home to living in a war zone; the kids get used to chaos."

Alcohol-related mortality rates among Native Americans are significantly higher than among the general population.

The youngsters' sense of chaos only increases as they turn to drugs or alcohol to ease their confusion, anger or depression. For these youths, education takes a back seat to survival. Blue Bay counselor Steve Matt says, "Most of our kids aren't doing anything in school. Most of them are caught up in the disease."

That's how it's been for 17-year-old Chris, who started drinking at 13, and this spring was at Blue Bay, along with five other boys. School bummed him out, he says, and this winter he simply stopped going.

Chris says his parents are alcoholics, although recently his mom stopped drinking.

"We had an incident in our family," he says. "My brother got drunk and stabbed my uncle. My mom, she was like all wasted, and like next morning she couldn't believe it. It scared her real bad."

Chris moved in with his grandparents, who don't drink and kept "bugging" him to quit. He decided to try.

In that half-street-wise, half-bashful manner peculiar to boys his age, Chris assesses the Blue Bay program.

"It's boring, but I'm learning," he says. "It's fun, kinda. It helps. It tries to teach you stuff — about ourselves, the source of our problems, how to deal with our feelings."

Text by Elizabeth Ichizawa
Photography by Daniel Bennett

But bringing the lessons home won't be easy.

"Yea, it's gonna be hard, cause everyone I know drinks," he says.

But some of the teen-agers are looking to the future with cautious optimism.

Jamie, for one, hopes one day to teach the Salish and Kootenai languages. She has begun to embrace the traditions of her past. Last year she became involved in Ronan High School's Indian Club, which sponsors traditional drumming, crafts and dancing, and raises money for trips to pow wows.

The road to her dream will be rough, but as Frost says, "These kids are amazing survivors."

HEALING YOUNGSTERS CLOSE TO HOME

Blue Bay Healing Center, on the east shore of Flathead Lake, is a beautiful spot, with its log buildings, and the blueness of the lake peeking through the pine trees. The facility is small, housing half a dozen kids, two counselors, a cook and a groundskeeper. Counselor Steve Matt, who was one of the program's chief architects, believes its small size keeps Blue Bay from becoming institutional.

Daily life at the center revolves around group discussions about the causes and effects of alcohol in families, communities and the kids' lives. Most afternoons, guests from the community talk to the youths about values like community service, education, spirituality, tribal and family identity, and traditional culture. Times are set for study, workouts and recreation. Matt also takes the youngsters on educational and enjoyable trips.

Matt tries to arm the kids against the boredom that can be deadly for someone trying to climb out of addiction.

"Kids want to be entertained today," he says. "What we do here is use leisure time more effectively, chemically free. The kids are learning to do that here."

Substance abuse programs for kids on the reservation have begun to target "peer cluster groups" — kids who associate with, or at least know, each other, and can lend mutual support. "The hope is that at least a few of them will bond together in recovery," Matt says.

The Blue Bay program with its focus on community-based treatment, peer and family involvement and community role models, is unusual. It was launched in 1990, one of the fruits of a tribal resolution to provide adolescents with community-based drug and alcohol treatment and prevention. The federal Office of Substance Abuse and Prevention and the Indian Health Service in Billings fund the program, but its future is by no means secure, particularly if the bureaucrats in Billings decide to centralize Montana treatment programs.

Steve Matt, head counselor at Blue Bay, says he hopes the healing center becomes a model for other community-based treatment programs.

"We're hoping the Indian Health Service will be looking at our program and saying, 'This is a good way to go,' that the tribes should take a stand on doing treatment for their own youth," Matt says.

Blue Bay counselors and others working with troubled youth on the reservation are also trying to incorporate traditional Indian culture and values into their work. This spring Matt took the boys to Missoula to research their tribal and family histories.

Robert,17, says at Blue Bay he's discovering the values of native culture.

"I didn't want to be a part of it at first," he says. "I thought it was dumb. A lot of teenagers think it's not cool, though they might look up to a medicine man." Now he says he wants to learn more about traditional ways.

During their last week at Blue Bay, Thomas "Bearhead" Swaney, director of Flathead Tribal Human Services, talked to the boys about cultural identity.

"Why do we do things to ourselves?" he asked them. "Why do we drink, or smoke cigarettes, or overeat? Because we don't have a sense, number one, of who we are." He told the boys to look back to when Indian culture was free of the white people's influence, and there was no substance, elder or child abuse, when Indians communicated with nature and the animals, and people — including those who were different — were cherished. As did the Indians of those days, he advises the boys to go out, observe nature and dream.

"That's how you get wisdom," he tells the youths. "Go out at least once a day and say to yourself, 'Where the hell am I going? What do I want out of life?' Build your own dream."

Indian students do have choices. The ones they make on a day-to-day basis can lead them to the same place as the people in these pictures, or somewhere else.

We know these photographs are controversial. We have spent endless hours discussing whether they should be run. We have consulted students and professors, both Native American and white at the University of Montana. The majority believes they should run because to bring about change you must first confront reality.

PHOTOGRAPHS NOT INTENDED TO SHOCK

The photographs you see on this page may shock you.

Dan McComb, a junior in journalism, took them as he was returning from an interview with the parent of an outstanding Native American high school student. He wasn't looking for these pictures. He was just walking around the town near the school grounds, camera in hand. He had stopped to talk to and photograph several people who were "hanging out." He was shocked when the man started hitting his girlfriend.

We know these photographs are controversial. We have spent endless hours discussing whether they should be run. We have consulted students and professors, both Native American and white at the University of Montana. The majority believes they should run because to bring about change you must first confront reality.

We have selected photos that do not readily identify the people involved.

Maybe the women who are in abusive relationships will see this and find the strength to get out of them. Maybe someone else will be moved to action by these photos and help these women. We hope so.

We worry that running these photos will perpetuate the myth of the drunken Indian. We all know, however, that alcoholism and abusive relationships cross all gender, racial and economic lines.

So why single out Native Americans here? Because this kind of situation does influence kids' opinions of themselves and their futures. Woody Kipp, a journalism graduate and a counselor in the Native American Studies Program, perhaps said it best when he saw these photos for the first time. "This is reality; this is what kids see on their way to school." Woody believes that some students become desensitized to alcoholism and abuse and accept it as a way of life. He says their expectations of their future are colored by constant exposure to these events. Perhaps this contributes to the poor high school graduation rate among Native Americans, to their limited expectations of themselves.

Larry LaCounte, a former high school superintendent and Native American Studies professor, points out that Indian students do have choices. The ones they make on a day-to-day basis can lead them to the same place as the people in these pictures or somewhere else.

The stories in this special report on Native American Education in Montana are full of references about abusive relationships, alcoholism, low self-esteem, racism.
It is easy to ignore statistics, to believe that Native Americans in Montana have as much of a chance of succeeding as their white counterparts. It's not as easy to ignore these pictures or the stories about these individuals.

Patty Reksten and Carol Van Valkenburg

LIVING WITHOUT LEGENDS MEANS THE DYING OF A PEOPLE

by Woody Kipp

In the heart of the Blackfeet Indian Reservation town of Browning there is an empty lot that still holds the rubble of a fire that destroyed the Yegen Hotel. Once, according to the very old who still remember Browning before liquor was made legal, the Yegen was an uptown place.

The two-story building had guest rooms that, while not fancy, were clean and respectable. On the ground floor was a cafe that mirrored the condition of the hotel. The food was wholesome; the ashtrays were kept washed. Drunks were not welcome inside.

The Yegen burned in 1990. By that time it had lost its respectability. It had become the home of the very poor, a boarding house where drinking liquor was the rule. The fire consumed the decades-old wooden structure quickly, leaving only the ghost of the building.

I lived in the Yegen Hotel in 1969-70. I had come back from the Vietnam War in 1967 after having spent 20 months in the Republic of South Vietnam. By the time I was discharged, I was an alcoholic. I had learned to drink cheap wine while still in the Marine Corps in California. Red Mountain at a dollar and a half a gallon.

Across the street from the Yegen Hotel had been the Buttrey store where, outside on benches, the old people used to sit and visit when I was a child. They were something from the past. Most spoke in the Blackfeet tongue, elderly men and women not so far removed from their traditional culture that they were unaware of the rapid change that was taking place even as they sat in the sun and visited.

By the time I came back from the war, the Buttrey building had been torn down, the lot where it stood now vacant. The benches and the old people were gone.

Instead, directly across the street from where the old people used to sit was a new crowd, younger, wilder, prone to drink, fight.

I had sat with the old people on the benches. Eagle Shoe, my great aunt's husband, had sat there and I with him. He was dead by the time I came home from the war, and besides, I had learned to drink and look at life through the bottom of a bottle.

We sat outside the Yegen Hotel, our cheap wine tucked into the sleeves of our coats. Sometimes, if we had cadged enough money, we would stumble across the street to the Minyard Bar. That was a place that had done much to add to the tough and uncompromising image of those who frequented reservation bars. You could walk into the Minyard Bar and be in a fight within a minute for no other reason than you happened to be there.

The warrior culture out of which the Blackfeet of today came had no intoxicants. The rapid destruction of Blackfeet society by the U.S. military, the missionaries, the political system and the socio-economic order that was dubbed God's will, or — more politely — Manifest Destiny, held that the American West was populated by a heathenish people who must be assimilated or destroyed.

It was a people who anthropologists now estimate had been in North America for somewhere between 18,000 and 40,000 years. During that long period these peoples developed a belief system, similar to that found among the ancient Greeks, that held that spiritual attainment was the pinnacle of man's endeavor. Their world was populated by myriad spiritual beings who were to be appeased in any human undertaking. Even in warfare, warriors went through spiritual cleansing ceremonies that would ensure their success against the enemy. When a necessity like food became scarce, it was a sign that the spirits had in some way been displaced.

Legends and mythological belief are necessary to the health of a culture. Myth and legend fire the imaginations of mankind, hurling him into contact with the gods and their doings, with rewards and punishments, with their laws.

To live without the stories of one's ancestors and their interactions with the powers of the universe is to live without a spiritual moral code that drives society; to kill these stories is to kill a culture.

The pictures that accompany this text are testament to that dying.

The sidewalk corner outside the Yegen Hotel had, through the years, acquired a nickname that became part of the reservation jargon — Dime Corner. If it became known that someone was hanging out at Dime Corner it was not a good thing. During the time I lived in the Yegen and hung out on Dime Corner I had no interest in what was going on in the rest of the town, the reservation, the state, the nation. Drinking was a small, immediate world in which you worried about where your next drink was coming from.

On Dime Corner we plied our drunken trade, bumming money from anybody we could, always promising to pay it back,

Woody Kipp, minority affairs adviser in the School of Journalism, helped teach the class that prepared this project.

never really intending to. Dime Corner did not pretend to be anything but what the name implied, a place to panhandle for dimes, quarters, maybe an occasional four-bit piece.

Sometimes we got lucky and one of our number would get a grazing lease check from the Bureau of Indian Affairs office for leasing his land to some white farmer or cattleman. Since the inception of the reservation, that has been the reality, leasing large Indian-owned acreages to non-Indians.

We, who sat on Dime Corner, could not get loans to work the land because it is held in trust by the U.S. government.

We sat on Dime Corner and drank and watched the cars go by. Some of those I drank with died of cirrhosis, some in car wrecks, some got shot, stabbed, beaten to death, and one was run over by a freight train while he was drunk and now hobbles around with no legs from the knees down.

Many of those whose fate came to rest in the dank and unhealthy interior of the Yegen Hotel were not unlike the hotel itself. They had been strong once. They had been healthy. And, like the hotel, they had been respectable.

On a day in 1953, the Blackfeet Tribal Business Council members decided that their tribal brothers should not have to go to the border town of Cut Bank to have a white man buy them a bottle of booze and illegally hand it out the back alley door of a tavern. The Blackfeet people would have their own bars where they could sit and exult in their newly acquired sense of social equality.

Soon, a half block away from Dime Corner was a Montana State liquor store. The liquor store beckoned death, and without the stories to tell us truly who we were, we went for it. Big time.

For nearly 40 years a drunken reign of terror has gripped a people who never before had experienced the plunge into total tribal chaos.

The opening of the Blackfeet Reservation to alcohol has been an experiment in tribal insanity.

Legalizing liquor on the reservation did not bring about social equality. It brought, instead, a scourge as bad or worse than the smallpox epidemics imported by the white man. One would be hard put to find a Blackfeet family that hasn't lost a loved one to a liquor-caused death.

In the hazy milieu of Dime Corner in 1969 I was not aware that a group of young Indians had formed the American Indian Movement in Minneapolis the previous year. A new cultural awareness was forming in Indian country, an awareness that would disavow the use of alcohol by native peoples.

It was an awareness that would start the return to the myths, legends and foundations of a culture that had survived for centuries without the use of money. Without alcohol. With pride, dignity and a respect for Mother Earth and all that she contained.

The disappearance of the Yegen Hotel may signal the ushering in of another era in the long history of the Blackfeet people.

Perhaps this is an era that will bring sobriety, a return to those values that were trampled on by the onslaught of white society, but did not die.

The stories, the myths, the legends that give meaning to Blackfeet existence are locked deep within the heart of Mother Earth. They cannot be touched by the ravages of white society.

When the Blackfeet are ready for them, they will be there, waiting.

Legalizing liquor on the reservation did not bring about social equality. It brought, instead, a scourge as bad or worse than the smallpox epidemics imported by the white man.

At Rocky Boy's:

'None of the money made here stays here'

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Text by Craig Stauber

At Rocky Boy's, the lowest the unemployment figures ever get are 40 percent and then only for a brief time in the summer.

Follow the money. Follow the paycheck of a member of the Rocky Boy's Reservation, and you'll begin to get a feel for one of the reasons unemployment ranges between 40 and 85 percent on the reservation for most of the year.

Tribal Councilman Jim Morsette states the problem this way: "None of the money made here stays here."

Traveling the reservation you can see Morsette is right. There are only a few small shops, a convenience store, and a casino/cafe. There is no grocery store, no department store, and no hardware store. The reservation has a "no alcohol" policy, so there is no bar.

Most residents take their business, and their money, to Havre, some 20 miles away. Once the money leaves the reservation, it will not come back.

That means less economic development, and fewer opportunities for residents. In a national economy that is quickly becoming geared toward requiring a college degree as minimum certification for skilled employment, the lack of opportunity begins to cut hard.

Morsette and others are working hard at economic development, hopeful that the businesses already in place and those now being developed will provide an economic base for Rocky Boy's that will allow for even more development. The resultant increases in steady employment and disposable income for tribal members will mean higher self-esteem, more opportunities for personal and educational development and fewer social problems.

In Montana, 75 percent of the white population aged 25 years or more has at least a high school education. In contrast, only about half the state's Indians of similar age have a high school diploma. The difference shows up in earning power. Just 11 percent of the state's white population lives below the poverty level. For Indians, it's 35 percent.

In the average community each dollar introduced into the economy can be expected to turn over seven or eight times. That is, each dollar will change hands several times, stimulating the economy.

Kenny Blatt, manager of the 4-C's Casino in Rocky Boy, says it's unusual for a dollar to turn over even once on the reservation. "Maybe they buy some milk or gas," Blatt said, "but then the money goes straight to Havre."

From an economic viewpoint, however, the most significant absence is a bank. Without a bank, economic development on the reservation already has two strikes against it. Money deposited into a checking account in Havre may never turn over even once in the Rocky Boy's economy.

"The number one problem in developing new businesses on the reservation," Morsette says, "is capital." There simply isn't any available on the reservation for business loans.

Further, outside banks have little incentive to make business loans available on the reservation. It is, after all, not their community.

Mayor Don Driscoll of Havre says he recognizes both the benefits his community gets from the reservation and the economic problems the reservation faces. He cautions, however, that the tribal government should not place too much emphasis on banks as a source of financing.

"Banks are not in the business of loaning money," Driscoll says, "they're in the business of making money."

As an alternative, Driscoll suggests making use of federal, state and local government development funds and grant programs.

One such source is Bear Paw Development Corp., which has a revolving loan fund available for new businesses in Liberty, Hill, and Blaine counties. With help from Bear Paw, the Chippewa-Cree Development Board, which both Blatt and Morsette are involved with, was able to start up what looks to be a viable large-scale business operation, Rocky Boy Manufacturing Inc. RBMI occupies a large building at the edge of Havre, and was rented to the development board by the Hill County commissioners at what RBMI President Ronnie Joe Henry calls "very favorable terms."

RBMI is now in its second year of operation. Operating RBMI is exactly the kind of job that Henry wanted. A 1985 graduate of Northern Montana College in Havre, where he earned a degree in business technology with a tribal management minor, Henry has always wanted to help his tribe develop more opportunities for advancement. He was born and raised on Rocky Boy's and, for eight years, was the tribe's economic development officer. He has worked hard to develop interest in new business endeavors on the reservation.

Henry, Morsette and Blatt all spoke favorably about Driscoll's support for tribal economic development and were also pleased by the efforts of the Hill County commissioners.

Still, there is a consensus that more needs to be done closer to home. RBMI is providing full-time employment for about 15 tribal members , and the 4-C's provides a few more jobs, but unemployment remains the norm on the reservation. More precisely, a pattern of on-and-off unemployment remains the norm. Morsette said that most residents can find only seasonal employment in fire-fighting or construction.

During winter, Morsette estimates the unemployment rate reaches 75 to 85 percent. Even during the summer months, however, Morsette and Blatt agree that 40 percent unemployment is about as low as the figures get, and then only briefly.

To combat reservation unemployment, Blatt says the development board has plans for several small businesses it would like to bring to Rocky Boy's.

The feasibility of a full-scale casino operation near Box Elder at the reservation's edge is under study, but the dispute with the State of Montana that has shut down all gambling on six of Montana's seven reservations has clouded the immediate future of that project. While the 4-C's was operating, Blatt says it brought in "a couple hundred-thousand dollars" each year from its bingo and video gambling operations, but attracted almost no off-reservation business.

Once the gambling issue is settled, the tribe hopes a fully operating casino, perhaps with hotel facilities, could draw large numbers of Montanans and tourists from Canada. Thousands of Canadians already visit the Havre/Great Falls area each year for shopping and recreation, and Morsette thinks the casino would become a regularly visited attraction for many of them.

Noting that the reservation has several ranchers, Morsette says he is also hoping to get a slaughtering operation in place so taking cattle to Havre would no longer be necessary. If it proves possible, Morsette says there would be other benefits to the tribe aside from lower shipping costs for ranchers and employment for a few slaughterhouse employees. With the meat being processed on the reservation, it would be easier to sell the meat directly to tribal members through an existing retail business.

Another possibility is a mini-mall, which Morsette says would allow several entrepreneurs to share the cost of construction and set up businesses that would allow residents to do at least some of their shopping on the reservation. With several shops at one location, it would also make the trip more attractive to tribal members living near the edge of the reservation.

One concern with this plan is that it not duplicate services already offered on the reservation. Too much competition for a limited market could hurt all involved.

For example, Paul "Rocky" Small Jr., owner of Rocky's Video, is already seeing trouble for his business. He started the first video rental store on the reservation. Now, a cafe also rents, as does one other person out of his home. Given a limited market, spreading the business among three renters dilutes the market almost to the point of non-profitability.

Morsette also hopes to gain a few jobs by persuading the federal government to put a post office on Rocky Boy's.

Besides his involvement with projects of the development board, Blatt has also been working on some ventures of his own. Most notable is his attempt at using the reservation's timber resources. Blatt invested $20,000 of his own money and purchased a portable sawmill, hiring RBMI to modify the trailer for easier use. He plans to buy the raw timber, make it into building material with the sawmill, and then hire local workers to build log homes. A prototype building was recently finished in Rocky Boy, and Blatt hopes it will attract more business.

Eventually, Blatt says he would like to form a consortium of Montana tribes that would process all timber from tribal lands. He thinks it makes no sense for the tribes to sell their timber to non-native processing plants, which then make the big profits off the finished products.

With one operation doing all the reservations' processing, Blatt hopes they could then sell the finished products back to the tribes for local building projects, thus providing further employment.

Although economic development seems to be going faster on Rocky Boy's these days, it still seems to be making little noticeable difference. Development goes in spurts, and most of the attention goes to nurturing those businesses already in place.

So, while there are still problems to be overcome at Rocky Boy's Reservation, people like Morsette, Blatt and Henry believe there may yet be a day when you can follow the money around Rocky Boy's community, and not out of it.

TRIBAL COLLEGES BUILD BRIDGE TO UNIVERSITIES

Joe McDonald: Outstanding Indian Educator

In 1975, only four Northern Cheyenne living on their reservation in Montana had a college education.

Today, more 100 Cheyenne hold college degrees, says Art McDonald, president of Dull Knife Memorial College in Lame Deer.

McDonald and others point to the establishment of the tribal college as an important reason for the education gains made not just by the Northern Cheyenne, but by tribal members on all of the state's seven reservations.

Each Indian reservation in Montana now has its own tribal college, making Montana the site of nearly a third of all the tribal colleges in the United States.

These schools offer Indian students the opportunity for higher education without forcing them to leave the close-knit environment of the reservation. Educators say that many Indian students who leave the reservation to attend a predominantly white college experience "culture shock" such that they return to the reservation without completing their education.

Bert Corcoran, president of Stone Child College on Rocky Boy's reservation, says that for most "going off the reservation was oftentimes a traumatic experience."

But the tribal colleges introduce the students to higher education in an atmosphere that recognizes cultural differences. And many of those who graduate from the tribal colleges transfer to four-year institutions. "If they had not attended and gotten started at Dull Knife, they would not have gone on," McDonald says of many of those 100 Northern Cheyenne who have earned college degrees.

For some, two years at the tribal college is an end in itself, but for many others the college close to home helps ease the transition to university life. Ray Carlisle, director of Educational Opportunity Programs at the University of Montana says it was "too big a leap" for many Indians to leave the reservation and come to college, yet they knew education was the bridge to a better life.

But for many "the bridge just wasn't long enough," he says. "The on-ramp just wasn't close enough to home."

In addition to the culture shock, some young natives are unable to cope with the racism they encounter in college, says Margaret Perez, president of Fort Belknap College in Harlem.

Perez speaks from painful experience. A fair-complected woman, Perez says the racial slurs she heard were not directed at her, since most of her classmates did not know that she was Indian.

One instance, in particular, stands out, she says. A student in one of her business classes made a presentation to his group about managing a retail store. He told the class that they must be sure to watch closely every time an Indian comes into the store. "He said, 'because Indians will always steal from you,'" Perez recalls.

Perez finished her degree, but many Indian students do not want to live every day struggling to succeed in the white man's colleges. Only about 3 percent of the students in Montana's university system are Native American, and their dropout rate far exceeds that of the general student population.

Nearly 93 percent of the students in tribal colleges are Native American, according to the office of the commissioner of higher education.

Joe McDonald, president of the Salish Kootenai College in Pablo, says tribal colleges are becoming increasingly crowded because of accessibility to Native Americans. Corcoran says the tribal colleges attract students because they do not discriminate. "We tell them everybody can go to college," he says.

Indian students can attend school mainly on financial aid and grants from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. The schools receive no state funding, but are aided financially by the tribes and the federal government. Many tribal college administrators have successfully attracted private funding to supplement the tribal and federal appropriations.

Joe McDonald also says that since the first tribal college was chartered in 1976, the percentage of Indians who attend college has risen to about 7 percent, compared to 5 percent of whites in Montana.

Corcoran says the tribal colleges have helped reservations by keeping culture alive and giving Indian students equal job opportunities. They also provide reservations with an educated work force.

Perez wouldn't trade her job for any other. "I used to want to be a professor at a four-year school," she says. "But once I started working at a tribal college, I don't know that I'd ever want to leave.

"You see miracles happen every day with our students."

Text by Kathy McLaughlin

Raise the topic of Indian education with nearly anyone with even a slight knowledge of the issue and within minutes you'll hear the name Joe McDonald.

McDonald is the founding president of Salish Kootenai College on the Flathead Reservation and, many people will argue, the pre-eminent Indian educator in the country.

It's not hard to make that argument. McDonald's list of awards and accomplishments is extraordinary. One of the more recent came from the National Indian Education Association, which named him its educator of the year. Western Montana College and the University of Montana have named him a distinguished alumnus, Little Big Horn College has given him its distinguished service award, and Montana State University has awarded him an honorary doctorate.

McDonald also has an earned doctorate, but, as he told a writer for a UM alumni magazine, he'd "faint" if his students ever called him "Dr. McDonald." To everybody, he's just "Joe."

This unassuming man has worked tirelessly to make Salish Kootenai College a model institution. In its first year the college enrolled eight students. Today, more than 800 are enrolled, half of them non-Indian. McDonald guided the school to earning full accreditation by the Northwest Association of Schools and Colleges and served as president of the American Indian Higher Education Consortium.

The list of his achievements is long, but what you won't find on his resume are the personal characteristics that so many of his friends say put him in a class alone.

"Joe is a gentle person; one of those of whom it might be said that he is strong enough to be able to be extremely gentle and thoughtful," Flathead-area businessman Bill Bishop wrote UM in support of one of McDonald's awards.

Board of Public Education member Tom Thompson said McDonald, who also served on the Flathead Tribal Council, began his public career when "Indian-white relations were at a low ebb," yet "helped bridge the gap of acceptance and understanding for whites and Indians alike."

Joe McDonald has built a career understanding people's differences and finding ways to direct those differences toward common goals. That's what makes him different.

> *"Education is our most powerful weapon. With it, we are the white man's equal. Without it, we are his victim."*
> Chief Plenty Coup

IN BROWNING, FINDING A NEW PATH

Innovative outreach program designed to help those who have quit

In Browning a decade ago, an Indian teenager's chances of finishing high school weren't much better than his chances of dropping out.

That statistic wasn't unique to the Blackfeet Reservation. While the 1980 census showed that three out of four adult Montanans had completed high school, for Indians in the state the figure was only one out of two.

But in Browning, as well as on other reservations, as more people realized the enormity of the problem, people like Carol Juneau began working diligently to improve the dropout rate.

The 1990 census shows their efforts are paying off. Now more than 66 percent of adult Indians on the Blackfeet Reservation have earned high school diplomas.

Juneau, the director of Browning's Stay in School Program, helps identify kids at risk of dropping out before it's too late. She works with about 80 children in kindergarten through eighth grade, trying to veer them off the path to ignorance, unemployment and poverty.

"We really believe in prevention as much as possible," she says. Juneau tries to find ways to keep youngsters in school and incorporates those strategies into the regular curriculum at Browning High School.

But for those students or former students in high school who need a helping hand at re-entering a learning environment, Juneau is there, too. The Outreach High School Program gives about 10 students the one-on-one contact they need. It's a little extra push to get them to do their homework, to show up for class.

Juneau says the U.S. Department of Education gave the program $293,000 to start up the school. That funding continues for four years, depending on the success of the school. But four years may not be enough for a program that's trying to tackle a bully this big.

"I really believe, you know, that a program should not come in, do all kinds of things for four years and then just be gone," she says.

Mike Madman, a certified state chemical dependency counselor who teaches high schoolers about drugs and alcohol and their mortifying effects, says he needs a much broader time frame to complete his work.

"We hope we're going to be around more than four years — 20 years, 30 years I hope," he says.

Even the planning took five years, Juneau says.

"It takes a while for change to happen, I think, in any community or any group or even particularly, I think, in a school system," she says.

One of the first steps a few years ago was to conduct a districtwide study, asking students, teachers and community members to identify what makes a child, whether in kindergarten or 12th grade, at-risk of dropping out.

She says the top 10 responses included poor grades, getting behind in schoolwork, drug and alcohol abuse, low self-esteem, discipline problems, skipping school and teen-age pregnancy.

"Low income or poverty was not identified as one of our criteria," she says, "where you see it on every national level." She says everyone in Browning deals with poverty; people don't single it out as a factor because no one is immune. "It's an every-day part of our lives."

But the reasons listed are consistent with national tendencies, she says. According to the Indian Nations at Risk Task Force, which published a report in October about national trends in American Indian education, Indians have the highest dropout rates in the nation, at 36 percent. This compares with 15 percent among whites nationwide.

The task force outlined four reasons why American Indian people, as a whole, are at risk:

Schools simply fail to educate substantial numbers of Indian children and adults;

Indian culture and language is deteriorating;

Tribal lands have been and still are being changed and compromised;

Indian governental rights are challenged.

Juneau says federal officials are beginning to see what a high hurdle American Indians must jump to receive a diploma. Her program's funding is proof: it comes from the Education Department's Dropout Demonstration Assistance Act, for precisely the types of programs Juneau is spearheading.

She says there isn't room for everyone in the high school program, but she doesn't slam the door in the face of those who can't get in. Out of about 20 applicants, she can only accept 10. But she guides the others in the right direction to find help somewhere. Sometimes it means sending them to the community college to study for their GED.

"So we're not going to tell any student, 'No, we can't help you,' but it's, 'We can help you in other ways, perhaps,'" she says. "Being that tie, that advocate for them."

The youths who do enter the outreach program follow the same curriculum as the high school students and use the same textbooks, but they get a lot of personal attention.

Ann Lunak, a language arts instructor for the program, says the teen-agers usually take about four classes a day. The classroom is one big room with several round tables in the center. Administrators have their own offices, but the secretary sits in the same room as the students.

Lunak says it's important to teach the same things as the high school does, but working one-on-one allows the students to really learn the material.

"National statistics show that a watered-down curriculum isn't the thing to do," she says.

Juneau agrees, because colleges and employers will have high expectations of the youngsters when they leave the reservation.

"A high school diploma is really important, but it's not enough nowadays," she says.

But Lunak says they need to aid students one step at a time, first focusing on high school graduation.

"Our goal is to get them back into the regular high school, and if not, give them a diploma that is worth just as much," she says.

Carol Juneau can give these kids the competitive edge they need to survive after high school. But as she says, a high school diploma isn't always enough these days. It will take solid self-confidence and marathon-like endurance for these kids to beat the odds.

Statistics show American Indians have the highest educational drop out rate in the nation.

Text by Karen Coates

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